

## Soundtrack

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### Introduction

Our taste in music can incite violent reactions. A song or work isn't interesting enough, is too sentimental, is too raw, is too slick, is derivative. I look back at so much of what I loved in childhood and recognize that the flaws I overlook would make some people not only hate the music, but even condemn me for owning up to still liking it. When we deem some piece of music bad, the judgment carries moral weight, notwithstanding the adage, *De gustibus non est disputandum*—there's no point in arguing over taste.

My object in this essay is to approach memoir through the music, whether rock or classical, folk or comedic, sacred or late romantic, that influenced me at each stage of my life. As I thought about representative pieces and searched the Internet for copies, I was pulled both into the effect the music had on me at each stage and the person I was.

Playing live concert clips from the sixties, I witnessed with the old bewilderment the insanely screaming teenage girls drowning out performances by the Beatles and other rock stars. Those girls are five decades older now, and many will be grandmothers. We become such different people as we go through life's stages, but a core of me remains from back then, as there's surely more than a trace of the lovesick teenager in each of those grandmothers.

I come to this idea of a music memoir from frustration at being unable to make music vivid in my traditional memoir writing. For one thing, the references would mean little or

nothing to a reader unfamiliar with them. Thanks to the Internet and my having a website, I can here direct the reader to the music I mention.

All the pieces I refer to appear online, thanks mostly to YouTube. For many pieces, several videos exist, and in almost every case I opted for the highest quality recording of the studio version. I linked only to a handful of recorded live performances. In three instances I chose mono versions because the integrated richness of the original sound dissipates in later stereo reconstructions. Many other pieces lack the sound quality of more recent recordings, which might bother today's listeners the way cheap stereos did me once I could afford something better. On the other hand, I'm bothered by the extreme digitality (don't look it up!) of much of today's recording. A happy medium was reached sometime between then and now, but what that happy medium was, of course, is subjective—*de gustibus...*

I'd like to dispose of one stereotype I have about another stereotype. It seems to me that the world assumes blind people are musical because they are denied other outlets and experiences. I lost my vision at the age of thirteen: Music was important to me before, and has remained so. However, I've had only rudimentary musical training. Other activities have taken precedence, beginning with reading and writing. That said, when I think about Leo Tolstoy, Alice Munro or Alan Furst, I feel little or no connection with what was happening in my life when I read them. Besides, while I forget all too much about a book a month after reading it, the songs I like stay note-perfect, fully arranged in my head.

Of course, associations only partly explain our response to particular pieces of music. At each moment, any number of works demand our attention. In his book, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (2006), Daniel Leviton investigates, among other things, why some people respond to this or that piece of music, while others do not. Music

affects our brains in detectable ways, so there is a physiological component. Levitin also explains that the brain is needed to interpret the different rates at which molecules vibrate against the ear's fine hairs in response to different pitches. Without the brain, there's no sound. But as Levitin is the first to acknowledge, much remains unknown. Like fellow scientist Oliver Sacks in *Musicophilia* (2007), he happily concedes that music is magical.

One caveat: Beware of volume fluctuations when clicking on links. YouTube apparently makes no attempt to match, or level, sound.

## 1. Childhood

Before I was seven, the music I liked was what we call classical, a lumping together of too many genres to mean much. There were the English composers, such as Elgar and Vaughan Williams; the German Brahms and the French César Franck; the Russians, such as Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov (really, the still exotic *Scheherazade*); and the Scandinavians Grieg and Sibelius. Come to think of it, I grew up with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century romantic composers.

My parents' classical records had the blue covers with white hands holding a conductor's baton that signified the [World Record Club](#), which they had belonged to back in our northern hometown of Darlington. Neither attended university, largely for economic reasons, and the WRC was part of their self-education.

My father and I liked much of the same music, not all of it classical, or rather, late romantic. I remember sitting on the stairs in our home in the London suburb of Harrow, where we moved when I was four, and dragging out bedtime while Dad played Caterina Valente's "[If Hearts Could Talk](#)" (1956) in the living room. I'm still moved by Valente's singing and even the

lush orchestration, along with that distant fond memory. But each musical phase has its own quirks that can spoil it for future listeners, and the beginning, middle section and ending of this recording are marred by high-pitched female ah-ing, an arrangers' addiction at the time.

Ronald Binge's *Elizabethan Serenade* (1951) epitomized Dad for me. Four decades later, Mum and he bought me a copy. I was surprised they remembered. I couldn't have named either the work or the composer, but I did remember the association I'd made in childhood. What was it about the piece that drew out my love for Dad? As I listen to it today, I note that the rhythm is steady, the tone is cheerful, and there are moments of feeling. "Nimrod," the ninth of Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (1898-1899) also made me think of Dad. Each movement represents an important person in Elgar's life. I now think of "Nimrod" as plumbing the deepest feelings of friendship, for Dad and other people I'm close to. My other favorite variation today is [the eighth](#), marked *allegretto*. The person who inspired it must have been delightful.

Until several weeks into this project, I was unable to identify the piece that used to make me think in much the same way of Mum. I knew only that it was the orchestral version of an operatic aria. It was all about depth of feeling, with less of the lightness of *Elizabethan Serenade*. As this project came to an end, after searching through dozens of arias, I finally located it: Offenbach's "[Barcarole](#)" from *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1880). (None of the online recordings does justice to the version that plays in my head, presumably derived from what BBC radio carried in the late fifties or early sixties.)

Dad installed an old 78 gramophone in the bedroom where my brother and I slept. Lucky for me, my brother didn't like any of our family's 78s, so I had little competition. (Our tastes have diverged throughout our lives.) I played Edward German's "[Shepherd's Dance](#)" (1892) over and over, despite the tedium of winding up the machine for nearly every side. By the time

Dad let me graduate to a gramophone that played 33 and 45 RPM records, I was also listening to folk music. My first purchase was Peter, Paul and Mary's "[Blowing in the Wind](#)" (1963). Then there was the Countrymen, an English folk trio. One of the Countrymen had a soul-touching tenor whose harmonizing distinguished them from other folk groups, except (as I discovered decades later) for Scott MacKenzie's too-infrequent tenor harmonies with the Journeymen. Some record producer inflicted an infuriating orchestration on the Countrymen's best known record, "[I Know Where I'm Going](#)" (1962), but I still take pleasure in their voices.

Two records, both released in 1961, captured the zeitgeist of the early sixties, at least in England. (It was only after we moved to America that I understood the civil rights context of "Blowing in the Wind.") One was the Dave Brubeck Quartet's cosmopolitan "[Take Five](#)." It created an image for me of smart people walking confidently in modern office districts. I may have made this connection from television footage while the song was playing, but Dad worked in an office in central London which, though I never visited it, was prominent in my imagination.

The second record to saturate the airwaves those years was "[Stranger on the Shore](#)" by a clarinetist with the unprepossessing name, Acker Bilk. I imagined I was observing the song's stranger, a girl or young woman, standing against a backdrop of a gray sea and dramatic sky. But was I actually imagining that I myself was the stranger in a faraway place, where the facts of life didn't intrude? One of those facts was several hospitalizations for orthopedic surgery and eye treatment. Another was a two-and-a-half-hour bus journey each day to and from a school for partially sighted children: bad enough in itself, but it also meant that none of my friends lived nearby.

The record became the theme song to a short-lived BBC series with the same title. Hearing it now reminds me that I thought the beach was in France, though I can recall nothing

that makes it distinctly French. A [Wikipedia reality check](#) tells me that the series was actually set in the English seaside town of Brighton. True, the main character was a French teenage *au pair* living with an English family, but my confused memory suggests I was already in love with France, even though we never went on holiday outside England. Perhaps it had the allure of the unattainable.

The Beatles, a whole different world from Brubeck's sophistication or Bilk's lyrical romanticism, came into my awareness in 1963, when Dad bought the first Beatles' LP, *Please Please Me*. Characteristically, I fell for the pretty songs, such as "[Ask Me Why](#)," but to my surprise, what really got me going was John Lennon belting out "[Twist and Shout](#)."

My first favorite pop group was the Searchers ("[Sweets for My Sweet](#)," 1963), and later Unit 4 + 2 ("[Concrete and Clay](#)," 1965). Although I liked some of the tracks on the first Beatles LP, I hated their early hit singles—"Please Please Me" (that LP's title song), "She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand" (all released in the UK in 1963). But by the time of *A Hard Day's Night* in the summer of 1964, I was hooked. The track I liked most from the UK release was the rarely-played "[I'll Be Back](#)." Still, it didn't occur to me to call the Beatles a favorite. The performers I treasured most were either hardly known (the Countrymen) or never given a whole lot of respect (Unit 4 + 2).

After having disliked pop music for so long, I wondered why I responded to the music coming out from 1963 on. I felt as if I'd been born to like it. How could that be? While working on the final draft of this essay, I happened to hear the Tornados' "[Telstar](#)" (1962). The title and some sound effects caught the outer space preoccupation that I shared with the rest of the world, but it also had an irresistible rock beat. I loved instrumentals, and maybe this instrumental's rhythm, so different from Brubeck's and Bilk's, served as my bridge to pop music.

In April, 1964, just short of my tenth birthday, we moved to Sheffield. My commute to the city's tiny school for partially sighted children was much shorter, but as in London, none of my classmates lived nearby. Here, however, I had the freedom to cycle on my eighteen-inch Raleigh along the local roads, down to the woods at the end of our street and, not too far distant, into the countryside.

Dad bought a little gramophone that sat on the formal dining room's floor, under his cabinet-supported player, which had much louder sound. On my own, I'd listen to my records while staring through our diamond-patterned leaded glass windows at one of Sheffield's valleys.

At the record shop on The Moor, Sheffield's main shopping street, I bought Gustav Holst's *Planets Suite* (1914-1916). Before the LP, I was familiar with the two famous movements, "Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity" and "Mars, the Bringer of War." I loved "Jupiter," with the rousing anthem planted in the middle, but I liked the movements that were new to me even more. Here's the concluding "Neptune, the Mystic." The ethereal women's choir and dangling orchestral chords transported me to some interior place. Neither the depiction of the solar system on the cover nor knowing that the planets were named for Roman gods interfered with my hearing of the suite.

A year after our arrival in Sheffield, I was sent to a boarding school for gifted but physically disabled children in Coventry, where I spent an unhappy three months that felt like three years. I ran away twice, making myself a pariah not only with the teachers, but also with the students, ultimately convincing the authorities to let me leave. During the school's interminable evenings and weekends, we were sent out to the playing field and forbidden to take books with us. I occupied the time by replaying in my head the sad songs of that spring, in 1965, such as Donovan's acoustic "Catch the Wind," with the opening lines: "In the chilly hours and

minutes / Of uncertainty / I want to be..." I couldn't make out the next line ("In the warm hold of your loving mind"), but substituted my own yearnings. I did that a lot with half-heard lyrics.

Then Petula Clark's cheerful "Thank You" (1964) would take me back to Mum's kitchen and our back garden at home. Perhaps I'd heard it on her radio as we ate breakfast. Today I note the corny backing vocals and the frequent key changes contriving to stretch out the song for a salable two minutes, but I can shut out all that distraction and still hear Petula's strong but gently expressive voice. And I love the harpsichord.

Much later I came across a letter my mother wrote to me at boarding school in which she mentioned she'd just heard Holst's "Jupiter" on the radio. I was touched by her gesture of connection, despite her knowing I resented Dad and her for having acquiesced to the experts who urged them to send me to that place.

For the next two years, I commuted to a school, Brook Comprehensive, on the other side of Sheffield. It was where the city's tiny partially sighted unit had just been transferred. However, I was to take all my classes with the regular students, as part of the country's first experiment in mainstreaming partially sighted children, leading to nationwide integration some decades later.

During each day's morning assembly, we sang hymns. It was the custom at all my English schools, but I best remember Brook's, in a spacious hall, sunlight streaming in from three sides, with rows of girls in royal blue jerseys on one side of the aisle and we boys in navy blue blazers on the other, the headmaster at front center, and the bearded religion teacher at the piano in the far left corner. Some of the hymns were lovely. I didn't have to be religious, and I wasn't (throughout my childhood, God was in the same category as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy), to be touched by them.



Simple performances of those hymns are few and far between on the Internet, but here's a relatively unadorned version of "[He Who Would Valiant Be](#)" (original text 1684 by John Bunyan), a hymn to a pilgrim that I liked despite my assumption that none of us in the school's assembly hall had any plans to follow in his footsteps. It seemed to me that the words to most songs were meaningless. One hymn whose words did have meaning was "[We Plough the Fields and Scatter](#)" (German original 1782, English appearance 1861), that celebrated harvest each autumn. But even though Uncle Mike ran a dairy farm near Carlisle, I was fuzzy on what exactly "harvest" involved. It was a word whose sound and spelling I liked, and that sufficed.

The "either/or" question of the mid-sixties, both musically and politically, was Beatles or Rolling Stones, decent blokes versus crude layabouts, harmony versus raw. Despite my antipathy to the Stones, I never tired of Keith Richards' growling guitar riff and the driving rhythm of "[The Last Time](#)" (1965). I supposed Mick Jagger's crude voice suited the song. I couldn't see Paul McCartney packing that angry intensity. McCartney's idea of raw emotion was a bemused R&B imitation on songs like "My Love Don't Give Me Presents," a line as mindless as it was annoyingly ungrammatical. Well, fair enough, McCartney obviously meant to be humorous, but the two songs do say something about what each group could and did not do.

The music coming out of America sounded more sophisticated than ours: the Ronettes' "[Do I Love You?](#)" (1964), Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "[Trains and Boats and Planes](#)" (1965), Barry McGuire's "[Eve of Destruction](#)" (1965), the Four Tops' "[Reach Out, I'll Be There](#)" (1966), Tina Turner's (forget Ike) "[River Deep, Mountain High](#)" (1966).

And then in 1966 the Beach Boys released the single "[God Only Knows](#)" (it was a B side in America) and the LP *Pet Sounds*. A mystical memory of mine is of "God Only Knows" playing from the front of our car as we drove south to Cornwall through a moonlit evening.

Growing up in England, I'd been spared the surf craze of the early sixties, and I might have been a lot less receptive had I first heard "Surfin' Safari" and the ilk. Or maybe not.

I saved up enough to buy *Pet Sounds* in the spring of 1967, a year after its release. Green was prominent on the cover and was also one of the colors on the label in the record's center. Whether for that reason or the synesthesia I sometimes experience, I see deep green when I hear the album.

On *Pet Sounds*, Brian Wilson produced and mixed sounds to create what Levitin calls "sonic colors" unlike any ever heard before, beginning with the harp-like arpeggio opening to "Wouldn't It Be Nice." Only later did I realize that the instrument pushing the body of the song was an accordion. There was the penetrating saxophone or harmonica (I could never decide which) on top of a banjo on "I Know There's an Answer," the violins and violas whose lines ended with a lovely electronic guitar figure on "Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)," the forlorn percussion leading into "Caroline No." Then there were the harmonies and, though overlooked in connection with Beach Boys' music, the interesting, varied rhythms.

Even the lyrics made sense. That is, they called to me. Most songs then, as always, were about love, and I didn't have a whole lot of experience of romantic love. But I had experienced longing, loneliness, rejection, as well as friendship and happiness, and it was all there in *Pet Sounds*. "You Still Believe in Me" spoke to the guilt I felt over a slew of failings, such as my conduct at the boarding school. I didn't allow that several hospital stays and our moves to Sheffield had made it difficult for me to settle down in yet another new place, especially one away from home. And I figured there had to be good reasons why I never fit in, again not allowing that it might have been due to my living so far from school. In "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times," Brian Wilson said I wasn't the only one.

## 2. Big Changes

The number one record on Thursday night's television show *Top of the Pops* during the summer of 1967 was Scott MacKenzie's "[San Francisco](#) (Be sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)." By then Dad had accepted a job offer in New York, and we'd be moving in November.

The Beach Boys had created for me a dreamlike image of California and recording studios in Los Angeles. MacKenzie's anthem, though a little tedious, opened up vistas of geographic beauty and personal freedom that made England feel walled in. Still, I knew enough to recognize that New York wasn't California.

Aside from sophisticated records, America was slick contemporary television series, led by *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, which the BBC broadcast at the same time that competing ITV aired Basil Rathbone's Sherlock Holmes films. It seemed to me the Americans were encroaching on our cultural territory. Not that the British couldn't be slick. At the cinema there were the James Bond films, notably *Goldfinger* (1964). Straying from chronology, my favorite Bond music was to become Shirley Bassey's performance of the [theme from Moonraker](#) (1979). Despite its short duration, Bassey's singing and John Barry's arrangement moves from sinister to tender to passionate. Many composers had written sinister songs, and Henry Mancini had melded the sinister to the humorous ([the theme from Pink Panther](#), 1963), but I believe John Barry, in both his Bond and non-Bond themes, was the first to marry sinister and romantic.

Meanwhile, Britain was going psychedelic. The Beatles released "[Strawberry Fields Forever](#)," with John's megaphoned voice, the slowed-tape tempos of the backing track, the calculated energy of Ringo's drumming. The Stones produced some wonderfully weird tracks of their own on *Their Satanic Majesty's Request* LP, such as "[She's a Rainbow](#)." For their single

“[2000 Light Years from Home](#),” *Top of the Pops* showed what today we’d call a video with waves of white light coming toward you from outer space.

For me, psychedelic music had nothing to do with drugs or the counterculture. I was too young, of course, but even as I came of age, it was always about the music.

A logical question is what I mean by psychedelic. A definition is beyond me, but elements include original sonic color, unforced and unaffected singing, interesting ideas (usually musical but sometimes lyrical), experimental form, and an appealing melody. There are those who will say such a description applies to many other musical genres. Wikipedia has some useful observations about [psychedelic music](#) and the related [progressive rock](#).)

In September, before our move to America, the retina detached in the eye with which I could see. For the next two months, I had to wear an eyepatch over my eye, lie still on a hospital bed and undergo surgery. Aside from visits by my parents and chatter in the eight-bed ward, my only distraction was the radio piped through the hospital’s system into a pillow phone tied to my bed’s iron railing. It carried only three channels: the BBC’s Light Program, [renamed Radio 2](#) at the end of September (a mixture of present and past popular music); the Home Program, which became Radio 4 (news, radio plays, stories); and a third channel used solely for Saturday local football broadcasts. No Radio 1, the new station dedicated to contemporary pop music, or Radio 3, the classical music station.

The song I always hoped for as I listened to Radio 2 was Traffic’s “[Hole in my Shoe](#)” (1967), with its lyrics about a hole letting water into the singer’s shoes while a girl flew on an albatross’s back. Romping rhythm, prancing Indian instruments, the lead singer’s modulated voice that belied the song’s absurdity.

The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* had been out before I was hospitalized, but the BBC didn't play any of its tracks, perhaps because none was released as a single. As I recall, both "[A Day in the Life](#)" and "[Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds](#)" were banned. Yet all the BBC disc jockey chatter on my hospital earpiece made me wish they'd let me hear the album for myself.

Dad and my brother went, as planned, to America in November, while I was transferred to Moorfields Hospital in London, to be placed in the care of the celebrated retina surgeon, [James Hudson](#). My mother moved in with relatives in commuting distance from the suburbs.

The patients on the 22-bed ward were a mix of young and old, trendy and old school. After two weeks and a second operation, I was allowed to remove the eye patch, and still later to walk around the ward. My vision wasn't as sharp as before, but serviceable. Moorfields was in the heart of 1967's swinging London. Although the young, animated nurses all wore staid uniforms, the 23-year-old ward secretary was required to wear only a long white coat over civilian clothes. When she took the chair at my bedside to read letters I'd received, her white coat would splay open to reveal her miniskirt and long legs stretched out before her. She told me about a Jimi Hendrix concert she went to, making me wish I could have gone with her.

Dad and Martin returned for a visit at Christmas, and I was allowed to join them for a few days. It was only then that I heard *Sgt. Pepper's* on my cousin's gramophone. My vision turned red after a few hours (due to blood spreading through the vitreous humor), creating a psychedelic place from which to hear "[Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds](#)": "Picture yourself in a boat on a river /With tangerine trees and marmalade skies." Well, I could, and did. I didn't even have to try.

That winter brought new records from the Beatles, the Beach Boys and others, but much as I looked forward to them being played through my hospital's pillow speaker, they weren't

groundbreaking the way music had been earlier in the year. The song that affected me the most was the Jimmy Webb-composed and arranged “[By the Time I Get to Phoenix](#)” (1967), in which Glen Campbell’s character laments his need to leave a woman behind. As I lay in bed in the quiet of the night ward listening to the lyrics, the lonesome flutes and anguished violins, the western United States place names—Phoenix, Albuquerque, Oklahoma—rolled through my head like road signs to alien places. My life just then seemed to be all about goodbyes: to my father, in America; to England, though it meant I’d rejoin Dad in America; to the patients and nurses who had been so supportive, and with such great humor. And, like the man in the song, I wasn’t just saying goodbye, but turning to a dubious future. Would my sight get worse? What would it be like in America? What would it be like in America if I could barely see?

### 3. America

In late January, 1968, our family was reunited in New Jersey, where friends, who had moved temporarily to Japan, lent us their house. My brother rightly predicted that I’d be a sucker for the recently released Lemon Pipers’ “[Green Tambourine](#),” which I responded to as the latest manifestation of American sophistication. I’d later hear the song mocked as bubble gum music. I hated bubble gum and people who chewed it, so the term dampened my enthusiasm.

For the next four months, forbidden to attend school, I was stuck in a house. After an operation in March, I lost my vision and never regained it. Unable to read (until a talking book player arrived weeks later) or get much from television, my only entertainment was AM top forty radio, and eventually progressive rock: WNEW-FM and WABC-FM. I discovered from these stations that mid-sixties rock stars Eric Burden and the Animals had gone psychedelic with their pulsating, Tina Turner-adoring, wolf-howling version of “[River Deep, Mountain High](#)” (1968),

with a captivating, suspenseful section two-thirds the way through. (All online copies of this track have some distortion.) Jonathan Schwartz, then on WNEW-FM, introduced me to the Free Design's lovely, childlike "[Kites are Fun](#)" (1967).

The quintessential FM rock band was the Doors. I never ceased to follow every guitar and organ note and every drum beat during the instrumental middle section of the album version of "[Light My Fire](#)" (1966). But most of the Doors' tracks unfolded too slowly to hold my attention. What I mostly liked was the feel of their music—really, the idea. Maybe this was music you needed drugs for. I was tempted to follow the Doors' Jim Morrison by drifting away from what Americans called reality. I was tempted, but didn't truly want it. It was ultimately a frightening place, as Jim Morrison's sordid end seemed to confirm.

Dad bought a house in Darien, Connecticut, and I started school there at the end of May. It was the last five weeks of eighth grade, and I was the junior high school's first blind student. I myself was the first blind student I'd known.

In the year that followed, two classmates invited me to their homes and played records to fill awkward gaps in our conversation. Bill introduced me to Herb Alpert's "[Flamingo](#)" (1966), while Mark played Richard Harris singing Jimmy Webb's "[If You Must Leave My Life](#)" and the rest of the album *A Tramp Shining* (1968). Perhaps they always played records when they had company over, but it also worked for me. I was suppressing talk about my life before America, partly because no one was really interested and partly because it was about the time I'd had sight, inevitably leading to what, to me, was the personal question of how I'd lost it. The music spared me from embarking on such emotional terrain. Besides, I liked the records.

I mostly encountered musical friction in Darien. The Beach Boys were despised, and Ringo Starr was deemed a third-rate drummer. For my classmates, as well as my brother, the best

in music was Cream, with their noise and wild drumming, and Jimi Hendrix, the showman. In England, I'd liked Cream's first record, "[I Feel Free](#)" (1966) and here in America Hendrix's "[All Along the Watchtower](#)" (1968), but these were songs. What people got into now were long tracks that highlighted what was considered virtuoso guitar playing. Virtuosity by itself didn't do it for me. I needed order in my songs: not formulas, but adherence to some design. Tracks that let musicians rip free were, to my mind, chaotic.

A disappointment was that Traffic had gone through a similar evolution that got them noticed by my American classmates. No one here knew "Hole in my Shoe." I wasn't only out of touch with current music, but also so much of the music I liked had never made it here in the first place, notwithstanding the so-called British invasion.

I experienced a similar feeling of being cast adrift when Cat Stevens' version of the British hymn "[Morning Has Broken](#)" (1931) got airplay in America in 1972. I was taken back to morning assemblies at Brook Comprehensive in Sheffield, another memory I couldn't share with my American friends. What was morning assembly, they would have wondered. And if I explained, they'd think how un-American it would be to begin each school day with prayers and hymns. The English were no more religious than Americans—less so—but the trappings of tradition dictated certain customs. Then again, schools in America enforced a semi-religious rite called the pledge of allegiance, which you had to recite standing, hand on heart.

For me, an immigrant not yet committed to this country, the pledge of allegiance was awkward. My allegiance, if any, was to the country I'd left, if not necessarily the Queen. But to refuse to participate would have been conspicuous, and I had no desire to insult the people among whom I now lived. The feeling of not quite belonging kept me at a distance not only from such ceremonies, but also from the events of the day. Three months after my arrival in America,



Martin Luther King had been assassinated, as was Robert Kennedy two months after that. I was distressed by these two calamities, and then frustrated when Richard Nixon was elected in November, seemingly against the tenor of the times. But I couldn't say I was engaged. I felt as if I were looking at another country's tragedies and feeling bad for the people there.

Or maybe it was that I felt powerless. I didn't feel comfortable participating in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam or the 1969 [moratorium](#) that high school students coordinated with college students. Still, protest was in the air at school and on the airwaves through the radio, as in Eric Burden and the Animals' "[Sky Pilot](#)" (1968). Burden's singing switched between contained anger and empathy, while a contagious bass line held the piece together through the build-up toward a battleground soundscape and a sensitively orchestrated conclusion.

I became friends with a student in a neighboring town who shared many of my interests in music and steered me to new records. In an earlier memoir, I give him the name Al, and I'll do that here, too. On the psychedelic Rotary Connection's "[Turn Me On](#)" (1968), Minnie Riperton harmonizes with one of the group's male singers in an arch, medieval-sounding style that is striking over the sitar, strings and throbbing bass.

Al surely had to pretend he wasn't fed up when I kept asking to hear once more the Incredible String Band's "[First Girl I Loved](#)" (1967), which had me wondering what it would be like to have a girl who loved me. And then Al would take me to an overcast day in northern California with Simon and Garfunkel's whimsical "[Cloudy](#)" (1966).

A loss from that time are the recordings by the Good Earth, which Pete Fornatale played during his Saturday morning show on Fordham University's WFUV, a show that Al alerted me to. One member of the duo went on to become a top forty artist, changing his name from Bill

Sweford to Oliver, while the other, Jim Dawson, writer of the Good Earth's material, later performed it on solo albums. But Sweford had been to Dawson what Garfunkel was to Simon: the harmony that transformed good songs to great. As far as I know, the original duo's recordings were never released commercially. Here's Jim Dawson's performance of "[Simple Song](#)" (1971), which benefits from his interplay with an audience.

Breakups of rock groups almost always resulted in disappointing solo careers. After going separate ways from Art Garfunkel, Paul Simon didn't regain greatness, for me at least, until *Graceland* (1986). Paul McCartney needed the counterweight of John Lennon's brooding skepticism, while Lennon needed McCartney's tuneful optimism. (George Harrison's post-Beatle career was different because he'd been subordinated in the group.) On his own, Brian Wilson proved to be mediocre, which wasn't solely due to his deteriorated voice, bearable today only when others harmonize with him. That surprised me because I had the impression he succeeded in spite, and not always with the support, of other members of the group.

One of my favorite groups during high school and beyond was the Moody Blues. The album *In Search of the Lost Chord* (1968) holds up well for me, while *To Our Children's Children's Children* (1969) is different in interesting ways from their usual material. The relatively unknown track, "[What Am I Doing Here?](#)" (1967), with Justin Hayward in the lead, shows them at their mysterious, inquiring, harmonic best. But Justin Hayward's solo career was to be another disenchantment. On his own, he sounded cloyingly sincere, and this quality tarnished some Moody Blues tracks for me.

Al was also blind, which obviously didn't explain our shared tastes. However, one difference from my high school friends might have been that we listened closely to music,

whereas people at my school mostly seemed to have it on in the background at parties or while doing homework. Much of what Al and I liked definitely wasn't dance music.

Still, I did wonder how much of my musical taste had been influenced by television and other images before I lost my vision and how much by the absence of fresh images afterwards. From the summer of 1967, when I last had good vision, I remembered the Beatles performing "All You Need is Love" on the [first-ever global satellite broadcast](#). Seeing the four of them in a recording studio with a small orchestra and other people around them in a party atmosphere added something to the song that wasn't inherent to it. Likewise, I knew that one reason I'd first been drawn to the Young Rascals' "[Groovin](#)" (also 1967) was the images shown on *Top of the Pops* of the group rowing a boat on a lake or river. (I now know they were filmed on the lake in Central Park.) Had I seen Cream performing tracks from *Disraeli Gears* (1967) or Jimi Hendrix in concert, would I have felt differently about their music?

Without vision, I also couldn't read titles and lyrics as I listened to my records. I was one of those people who had difficulty hearing the words to songs. Even when they weren't obscured, I'd lose the thread because I kept being distracted by the music. Would I have better appreciated Bob Dylan, for example, if I'd been able to read the lyrics along with his records?

Among the discoveries I made on my own was the Association's completely original "[Under Branches](#)" (1969), which started from a still point, blazed through a turbulent middle section, then ended back at the still point. It was the kind of emotional resolution I seemed to need. I found something similar in the Zombies' last album, originally titled *Odessey and Oracle* [sic] (1968), a radical departure from what they'd done before. I'd heard "[Care of Cell 44](#)" (sung to a prison inmate about to be released) while I'd been in hospital in 1967, but I knew nothing about the album on which it appeared until high school. Another song on the album,

“[Beechwood Park](#),” transported me back to my bike rides through the woods in Sheffield. Here I was, an adolescent, already nostalgic, though the reasons were obvious enough. I missed England, missed being able to see, missed the relative independence that came with vision, whether riding my bike around the neighborhood or taking the bus into town.

It was the Bonzo Dog Band that showed me a song can be funny but still appreciated musically, such as their satires on the blues, “[Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?](#)” (1968) and on 1920s crooning morphing into Glenn Miller, in “[Tubas in the Moonlight](#)” (1969). I bought my first Bonzo Dog record on a trip back to England at a shop with my cousin, Liz, who went on reading aloud the nutty song titles even as she whispered that some guys were staring and grinning.

Meanwhile, I rediscovered Françoise Hardy, the French pop star who had had a hit in England with “[All Over the World](#)” (1964). An English-language album turned up in one of Sears’ record stacks which my parents would help me look through. On Hardy’s “[Why Even Try](#)” (1969), over a struggling guitar turning into firm strums, soft strings and two dramatic arpeggio piano sections, the singer tries to persuade her lover to bear the pain of love (“Our two hearts are the same, they could turn out untrue”) rather than “stay in your ivory tower / Grow in peace like some secret flower.” ([Here](#) is an English translation.) The French version is “[A Quoi Ca Sert.](#)”

On an earlier album, but one I came to later, *Ma Jeunesse Fout le Camp* (1967), the song “[Qui Peut Dire](#)” was very different: two minutes of noise that is yet melodic and full of satisfying harmonics surrounding Hardy’s tender singing. My brother figured I had a crush on Hardy, which made no sense to me. How could I have a crush on someone I hadn’t met and never would?

I had little feel for black music. All the music I knew recorded by black artists had been either targeted at white audiences (the black girl groups controlled by Phil Spector) or designed to bridge the gap between black and white (Motown). Darien was almost exclusively white. Of course, I'd read books by numerous black authors, above all Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, and I was troubled by the rifts that had existed between Martin Luther King and more radical black leaders. In social science, we discussed such contemporary events as the [racially-charged riot and massacre at Attica prison](#). Seven years later (a century on my internal clock, after high school, college and law school), I was a lawyer and some of my clients were imprisoned there. But James Brown and other black R&B artists weren't played at our parties, and so practically all my experience of black people was through reading.

My first foray into soul music was Isaac Hayes' "[The Look of Love](#)" (1970). [Dusty Springfield's version](#), recorded for the 1967 film *Casino Royale*, would remain inseparable from the Bacharach/David song, but Hayes' arrangement is from a different planet. Every note played, every drum beat and symbol tap, on this long track felt essential. The sounds of the brass, strings and drums seemed to flow around a large interior, while the bass and the wah-wah guitar anchored them. It took me a while to get used to Hayes' voice, but it came to seem right for the overall LP, *...To Be Continued*.

For much of my junior year, I spent several hours each weekend with a girl whom I now associate with the folk songs that a friend of hers performed in local coffee houses. I wasn't fond of the folk songs popular at the time, but Jose Feliciano plays a lovely guitar on "[The Last Thing on My Mind](#)" (1968). Maybe my dislike of that folk music reflected the detachment I felt in that relationship, as I think she did, too. Come to think of it, that's what this song is about. And the song is better than I remembered.

During my last year and a half of high school, I fell in with a group of academically-minded, mostly non-jock students. At their parties, they played The Who's *Tommy* (1969) over and over without either they or I ever talking about the rock opera's lead character's handicaps. Aside from my discomfort at the idea of a disabled kid with fantastical powers, it bothered me that no one knew that one of the best riffs on the album had already appeared in "[Rael 1 and 2](#)," the concluding track of *The Who Sell Out* (1967). (On "Rael," the riff starts at the line "He's crazy if he thinks we're coming back again.") This album was my favorite by The Who, with its acoustic songs, electronic psychedelia and humor. For example, Pete Townsend's acoustic "[Sunrise](#)" reveals a range, vocal and maybe even artistic, that is lost in his better-known recordings.

I'd go home and play Copland's *Appalachian Spring* (1944), the first piece by an American composer I liked. I didn't just like it. It took me to a Garden of Eden in those mountains a few hundred miles southwest where I imagined I'd feel at home, the way I didn't in this insular Connecticut town. (The performance I had was led by Leonard Bernstein, conductor on the YouTube version I chose, although the orchestra seems shaky at the beginning and there are scratches.)

#### 4. College

My high school guidance counselor drew up a list of colleges for me to look into. The one that kept tugging at me and that I eventually chose was Amherst, in western Massachusetts, a three-hour drive north of Darien. Is it too much to speculate that a tiny part of the attraction was the Boston group, Orpheus? They had only one semi-hit, "[Can't Find the Time](#)" (1968), but

several of their songs conjured up what to me was the mystical, bracing air of western Massachusetts, most of all “[As They All Fall](#)” (1969).

I call to mind my college roommate, Josh, roaming around the suite chanting, “War, huh, good God y'all, what is it good for?” echoing Edwin Starr in “[War](#)” (1970). Josh, though a white guy from a New Jersey suburb that was almost as white as Darien, had somehow been more exposed to black culture than I. He loved to play tapes of Martin Luther King’s speeches, and like King, he was upset by America’s involvement in Vietnam. But even though “War” was a serious protest song, when Josh chanted Edwin Starr’s line, he was being exuberantly satirical, imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. In a fluky way, his affectionate mimicry helped me become receptive to more black music, and through it black culture, than I’d been before.

My college freshman class was the last to be subject to the draft, but my 4F disabled status spared me. If there were other 4Fs at Amherst, they weren’t obvious. Standing with classmates around a TV set to watch the lottery in March, I felt the loneliness in a crowd that comes from conspicuous difference. Had I been eligible to be called up, I would have been scared out of my mind, but it felt wrong to be safe when others my age were at risk. For such a predicament, there were no songs.

My other roommate, Dana, sang and played guitar at parties. Like me, he loved the group Orpheus, as well as the Canadian folk musician, Gordon Lightfoot, whom Al (my friend during high school) had introduced me to. My favorite Lightfoot song to that point in his career was “[The Last Time I Saw Her](#)” (1968), where the singer recalls his loss in a strong voice bent on pushing back despair. The few times his voice falters, the orchestra rises up like inner strength.

A former Amherst graduate who was also a musician and later adopted the name Mason Daring would return to the college to perform his work. I still hear in my head his song,

“[Marblehead Morning](#),” set in New England sailing ship days, with the man and woman parting as his ship is about to depart. Here again was that mystical appeal that Massachusetts had for me, in this case accentuated by the song’s subject, which took me back to such British folk songs as “Blow the Wind Southerly.” Unfortunately, the only performances of “Marblehead Morning” I can find on YouTube are recent and disappointing. Still, when his singing partner, Jeanie Stahl, joins in, the song regains some of its power.

Listening to Jeanie Stahl accompany Daring brings to mind “[Take Me Home, Country Road](#)”: not the John Denver version, despite the link, but one sung in the Amherst College cafeteria when the woman I obsessed over for more than a year sang harmony for a friend of hers. Hearing in my mind her voice in that harmonizing role still makes me smile, even though I was frustrated that our confiding, wide-ranging talks never went much beyond that. But she was a thoughtful and kind person. It’s been said that what we love in others is what we hope to find in ourselves. Music can be a window into what that is.

During college my interest in classical music was reinvigorated. This time it was true classical music from the late eighteenth century, specifically Mozart. An upperclassman from Edinburgh briefly took me under his wing and introduced me to Mozart’s 40th Symphony, the G Minor. It still strikes me as an expressive departure from the constrained music that went before.

The next semester, my Music 11 professor told us not to listen to music for sensory associations, but rather, for the music itself. By way of example, he played a 1922 piano-roll recording of Maurice Ravel performing his composition, *[Pavane Pour une Infante Défunte](#)* (1899). It certainly has a different feel from the usual romantic interpretation, and yet it was Ravel who gave the piece the highly romanticized name, rendered in English as “Pavane for a Dead Princess.” “*Infante*” has the [connotation of “princess”](#) in French.



I learned from that course how a traditional classical symphony's first and last movements start with an exposition, followed by the development, and conclude with the recapitulation; how there are primary and secondary themes; and so on. Here was order, what I'd always craved in music. Not that I saw "order" as a virtue. To me, order was a matter of temperament. I wasn't particularly proud of it; for long stretches in my life I'd been embarrassed by it. But it wasn't an argument. It was part of who I was.

On the April evening of my twentieth birthday, second semester of my sophomore year, I sat alone on the steps leading down Memorial Hill. I rued how I hadn't achieved anything worthwhile: a lot of going-nowhere poems, lots of good grades though with some poor performances, my inability to get college women interested in me beyond confiding, my feeling that I lacked control over my own destiny. My gloomy inventory at last exhausted, I got up to leave. At my dorm, I found friends waiting to celebrate my birthday. They passed around a joint, a rare event for all of us, and played Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), which I hadn't heard before. When [all the clocks went off](#) several minutes into the first side, I laughed uproariously. Perhaps without marijuana, I might not have enjoyed the album on my first listen, a thought that took me back to my drug-innocent reflections on The Doors.

*Dark Side of the Moon* came toward the end of psychedelia. Its reputation was undoubtedly damaged by drug and counterculture connections, but other music, from blues to jazz, survived unsavory associations. Were the war in Vietnam and psychedelic/progressive music linked? The conjunction of activist politics and progressive music in the mid-sixties to mid-seventies is inescapable. By Ronald Reagan's presidency in the eighties, the country was returning to its historically conservative ways. Psychedelic rock, having merged with and disappeared into progressive rock, followed an almost simultaneous path, going into a [steady](#)

[decline by the mid-eighties](#). Coincidence doesn't make cause and effect. Still, it seems apparent that the war in Vietnam was the life-blood of both sixties radicalism and psychedelic music. Left-wing political activism faded as people felt less threatened by military service. Why the end of Vietnam-era passions should also mark the death knell for psychedelic music baffles me.

I suppose it's possible that psychedelic music had run its course, just as the eighteenth century classical symphony reached a point where dozens, if not hundreds, of tedious works were written in that mold, as many recordings confirm. If so, psychedelia's time was short—too short. Absent external circumstances, I wonder if its well would have dried up so soon.

To combat the sense of futility I'd confronted during my sojourn on Memorial Hill, I arranged to go to Montreal for the summer. I'd never been there, but it had always appealed to me, probably because of its mixed Francophone and Anglophone population. I planned on teaching English at the college level, and in order to win a place in graduate school, I would need two foreign languages. I was already studying French. My Russian literature professor, despite knowing my love of that literature, urged me to choose German as my second. I selected an intensive German summer program at McGill University precisely because it was in Montreal.

Veronique Sanson's defiant "[Besoin de Personne](#)" (roughly, "I Need No One"), was a hit in Quebec that summer. Meanwhile, a certain woman introduced me to the Alfred Deller consort's recording of Purcell's [Come Ye Sons of Art](#) (1694), one of the most joyful pieces of music I know, despite the somber opening. The basso continuo on several movements has a groove (thank you, Dr. Levitin, for lending respectability to this word) that's as catchy as any rock rhythm from three centuries later, and the imaginative use of instruments fits my notion of psychedelic. In love with the city, I fell under Sanson's spell, despite a warbling voice that I've come to dislike; in love with the woman, I fell under Purcell's, and I still am.

Of the rock concerts I've attended, the one I best remember was Joni Mitchell and the L.A. Express performing in an open air stadium that summer in Montreal. I once came across a list of Joni Mitchell's concerts given that year. This one wasn't listed, but I'm not imagining it. I wasn't a fan of Mitchell, who started the octave-jumping yodel-like style among women singers that continues to this day. But for a brief time in the mid-seventies, with the jazz group Tom Scott and the L.A. Express, she used her fine voice to superb effect. Here is "[You Turn Me on I'm a Radio](#)," from another live concert that Mitchell and the L.A. Express gave that summer and that preserves the exhilarating exchanges between Mitchell's voice and the L.A. Express's electric guitar player. The recording even captures the natural echoes of the sounds rising into the night.

In Paris seventeen years later, I was to be introduced to a true Quebecoise (Sanson is French), Fabienne Thibeault, whose "[Les Filles Comme Moi](#)" (late 1970s) brings Quebec to life for me more than any other song. There's a poignancy in the electric guitar notes that makes me think of a people cut adrift thousands of miles from their home, while I find the plaintive feel of Thibeault's voice reminiscent of a simple hopefulness among the Francophones that I'd sensed in 1974. If Thibeault is known at all in the English-speaking world, it is for her beautiful recording of Michel Berger's "[Le Monde Est Stone](#)" (1978, later performed in English as "The World Is Stone" by Cyndi Lauper).

After leaving Montreal, I spent the autumn at an English University (coincidentally Sheffield) with a view to resolving which country to make my home. While there, I went to a Fairport Convention concert, with Sandy Denny in the lead. Here they are on "[Fotheringay](#)" (1969). Who knows why certain music feels quintessentially one nationality or another, but Sandy Denny and Fairport Convention were indisputably English. (The phrase "Who knows"

brings to mind their best known song, “[Who Knows Where the Time Goes?](#)” (also 1969, later covered by Judy Collins.)

This question of Englishness felt poignant when, on the plane flying back to New York in time for Christmas, I made the decision to stay in America. I’d be giving up a sense of belonging that I could never gain as an expatriate in America. But by then there was so much that I’d miss about America. In either country, I was bound at times to feel like an exile.

## 5. Law School

During my three years at Harvard Law School, not only did I make new friends, but a number of college friends had also migrated to the Boston area. I’d jettisoned my college teaching plan a year earlier out of idealism and because of a desire to get a career started long before I could expect to be appointed assistant professor somewhere. Still, I entered law school with a sense of dread. While I’d been nervous about college, subject-wise it had been a continuation of high school. The law was a whole new departure.

Steve was a college friend who lived on Beacon Hill, and I never tired of his playing Debussy’s “[Clair de Lune](#)” (1905, here performed by Kun Woo Paik) on his piano. French music is sometimes said to be pretty, as if to set it apart from beautiful; “*Clair de Lune*” is one of any number of French works that belies the distinction.

One afternoon Steve put Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Gerald Moore’s version of Schumann’s lieder cycle, *Frauenliebe und Leben* (1840) on the turntable. I settled into an armchair and started to read my braille notes for a course, since I was always studying. Steve asked if I couldn’t just listen. I put aside the notes. He was right. Listening isn’t being divided between two tasks. Music, above all classical music, requires attention. I already knew that about

the rock music I listened to. It was just that classical music, broadly speaking, demands more patience. (Schwarzkopf's tender, confiding rendering of *Frauenliebe und Leben* has disappeared, except, it would seem, for my worn LP. Apart from a mention here and there, I can't find a copy anywhere online. However, a nice substitute is the version by [Janet Baker and Geoffrey Parsons](#) recorded sometime in the 1960s.)

Another Beacon Hill friend played a harpsichord that he himself had built. I must have tried his patience when, each time I visited his home, I asked him to play again François Couperin's "[Les Barricades Mystérieuses](#)" (1717, here performed by Georges Cziffra). A short piece, it feels so modern to me that it has no place in the early eighteenth century.

My former college roommate, Dana, spent a few days with me shortly after Fleetwood Mac's [Rumours](#) was released in February, 1977. Parked in my room in a law school residence, since torn down, we listened to it over and over again. I've played any number of records and CDs to death, but my capacity to enjoy them keeps resurrecting itself. Unfortunately, not so with *Rumours*. But the loss doesn't detract from that memory. When you can't see, so many activities can't be shared. There's the old joke: What is endless love? —Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles playing tennis. And I'm too slow a braille-reader for most people at cards. But if two of us are enthralled by the same piece of music, the kind of nonverbal companionship can come about that keeps friendships well-oiled. Then again, Dana and I would later attend a Mets game at Shea and a Red Sox game in enemy Yankee Stadium territory, where, an unabashed ham, he kept up a continuous play-by-play commentary.

By contrast with *Rumours*, Jefferson Starship's *Red Octopus* (1975), another law school discovery, is still vibrant with passion—that's the only word for it. Grace Slick, energetically backed by the rest of the band, pours out her heart and yet maintains exquisite voice control in

“Fast Buck.” On “[Tumblin’](#),” Marty Balin emphatically repeats the phrase “This time,” with Slick echoing in the background, in a forceful avowal to put things right.

Another college friend, David, a scientist and opera singer, and I spent a day together in Chicago the summer I clerked in nearby Madison, Wisconsin. We attended an open-air concert at the Science and Industry Museum. It was there that I first heard Mozart’s Serenade No. 10 for winds in B flat major, above all the famous [Adagio](#), with its infectious rhythm and summer-warm melodies. It gave voice to the sense of well-being that I had from working at my first law-related job.

Back in Madison, a woman who would show up at my apartment any time of day, sometimes in the middle of the night, introduced me to Stanley Turrentine’s “[Salt Song](#)” (1972). Some jazz is too complex for me, other jazz puts me to sleep. Turrentine holds my interest throughout.

So does—except even more so—Duke Ellington’s 1956 live performance at Newport of “[Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue](#),” which I heard a couple of decades later. Despite the poor microphone processing, you can hear the renowned solo by Paul Gonsalves. No matter how many times I play it, I can’t keep still to the relentless beat of the drums and bass. Gonsalves’s driving solo is occasionally punctuated by the drummer’s off-rhythm responses and, toward the end, Ellington’s nicely-timed piano chords. Electricity comes from the enthusiastic, even incredulous audience.

Returning to law school for my second year, I promptly fell ill with mononucleosis and was hospitalized for ten days. In addition to distracting myself with Red Sox games, leading up to their mortifying defeat by the Yankees in the 1977 one-game playoff, I’d listen for Bob Marley & The Wailers’ “[Waiting in Vain](#)” to play on the radio. His fatherly voice over the mild

reggae rhythm was a comfort. After that, it was an autumn of intense dreams and working around constant exhaustion.

WGBH's Morning Pro Musica host, [Robert J. Lurtsema](#), often played Bach. My view of God had gone from the tooth fairy phase to agnosticism (you can no more disprove God's existence than prove it) in high school to my confirmation in the Episcopalian faith at Grace Church, in Amherst. By my second year of law school, I'd fallen back to agnosticism, but touched now by a religious sensibility. I didn't pretend to know, and I certainly didn't wish to argue, about such things. Under Lurtsema's influence, I spent some precious cash on a box set of Bach's initial four cantatas, which is how I originally heard the opening choral movement to [the first](#), "*Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*" ("How beautifully the morning star shines," 1725, here performed by the Munich Bach Orchestra and Choir, Karl Richter conducting). It is a full-throated, openhearted, unambiguous gesture toward heaven.

As graduation approached, I was reluctant to leave Cambridge, even though I'd accepted a job offer in New York, and so I sublet an apartment for the summer and studied for the New York bar at the law school. For the few free days preceding graduation, my law school friend, Barry, and I flew to Montreal and Quebec City, where I found a new Françoise Hardy album. During the intensive bar preparation, I'd take a break from studying and play the album's seven-minute title song, "[Star](#)" (1977). (Later I discovered it is a version of Janice Ian's original "Stars.") With its row of west-facing windows, the living room of my top-floor sublet was bright and airy, and I imagined the song's arpeggio guitar chords floating through the room like sunlight over the bobbing surface of the Aegean.

## 6. New York

My first full-time job was handling the appeals for people who had been convicted of criminal offenses. After two and a half years of that work, which I gave up reluctantly, I spent the next seventeen-and-a-half in consumer protection, where my most rewarding position was running a statewide mediation program. If the law was reflected in the music I listened to, it was in the confidence that came with the independence I'd long sought. But there were other things going on.

Soon after I moved to Brooklyn, I met a woman on a subway platform who was a fan of an Italian singer I'd never heard of named Mina. For a time, nothing was more exciting than “[E Poi](#),” from Mina's richly-textured *Frutta e Verdura* LP (“Fruit and Vegetables,” 1973). It must have been getting airplay in New York at the time, six or seven years after its release in Italy. Once I even heard it over a clothing store's sound system. It was the backdrop to my early days in the city and that short-lived relationship.

I remain hooked on the albums Mina recorded in the seventies: not before, and little afterwards. One of her more unusual tracks is “[Amanti di Valore](#)” (also 1973), a kind of psychedelic jazz. “[Parole](#)” (meaning “Words,” 1972), has two lovers fighting like cats and dogs, as becomes clear in this televised performance.

I stayed more or less content in my ignorance of what was being said in a song. Although curious about lyrics, I knew most were awful, and not just on rock records. The poems to which Schumann set *Frauenliebe und Leben* were terrible.

Likewise, I rarely liked it when my favorite foreign performers sang in English. They tended to sound like bad parodies. One exception was Germany's Nina. On the inaptly-titled “[Let Me Be Your Pirate](#)” (1984), knowing from the singer's English line that “the moon will



keep us company” enhanced the dreamy aura as she went quiet and the sax drifted away. The unusual percussion sequence started out like an anxious heartbeat, but as the sax faded, it resolved into a heartbeat at peace.

A girlfriend I saw off and on for several years gave me John Lennon’s “[Just Like Starting Over](#)” one time we got back together. It felt oddly early-sixties, but its happy, romping beat couldn’t help but make me feel cheerful. Then, on December 8, 1980, less than two months after its release, Lennon was murdered. In producing a song that hailed back fifteen or twenty years, had Lennon been saying he’d come full-cycle? Of course not: He wasn’t anticipating his premature death. We’re always finding significance after the fact. These days, I hear the song for itself, with grief for Lennon and affection for my old friend. Such is the complexity that passing time can weave into a song.

I bought my albums at J&R, a jerry-rigged store across from City Hall Park that required customers to walk up several flights of a rectangular staircase. It was absolutely not prepossessing. When I went on my own, a certain salesman always noticed my arrival, asked what I wanted, told me to wait while he went to find it, then jumped me to the front of the sales register line, saying to the clerk, “Look after this guy for me.”

One of my musical infatuations that J&R satisfied was Joan Armatrading. I don’t remember how I heard about her. The first album of hers I bought, *To the Limit* (1978), hooked me with her compositions and the musicianship. The backup band maintained an addictive rhythm behind Armatrading’s lyrics of liberation in the whimsically titled “[Barefoot and Pregnant](#).” Each of her albums had a different feel. *Me, Myself, I* (1980) abandoned the musical (though not the lyrical) intimacy of earlier albums, but a few listenings took me past my resistance. With her “[All the Way from America](#),” I converted Armatrading’s song, about a

faraway lover who cruelly keeps the woman on hold, to the disquiet I still sometimes felt at living thousands of miles from England. I later learned that Armatrading was popular in Britain, though no one I knew in America knew of her. I bought every album I could find until her seventh, *Walk Under Ladders* (1981), when she took a big-sound turn that I didn't like.

One time I went to J&R in search of a Mina album with my then reader, a young Italian named Caterina. Though she was just off the boat, as I'd tell people, her English was impeccable. She had just a trace of an accent which, naturally, was charming. The only word she never learned to pronounce was Poughkeepsie, which she enunciated, Poe-gus-pie. At J&R, after we determined there was no new Mina album, she steered me to Franco Battiato's, *La Voce del Padrone* ("His Master's Voice," 1981). That night, I was swept up by the synthpop rhythm, dark brass and airy Italian strings backing Battiato's voice, modulating with ease from baritone to tenor to falsetto. Even though I understood none of the Italian lyrics, the album was permeated with humor, three tracks featuring an over-the-top macho male chorus. On "Cuccurucucù," the chorus sings seemingly random lines from American and British pop songs, such as, "Goodbye, Ruby Tuesday / come on, baby, let's twist again." To give a sense of Battiato's musical range, here's "*I Treni Di Tozeur*" ("The Trains of Tozeur"), from his 1985 album *Mondi Lontanissimi* ("Very Distant Worlds").

I came to associate the group Manfred Mann, whose recordings in the eighties were completely different from their sixties hits, with a woman with whom I had a two-year relationship. Little did I know when she had me play their version of Springsteen's "For You" (1980) three times in a row that she was foreshadowing several months of her own psychiatric hospitalization. It was only on the third hearing that the song affected me, but after that it never lost its power.

Recalling the years of wandering in the wilderness when that relationship came to a tragic end, I hear in my memory Cyndi Lauper's "[Time After Time](#)." It is playing on the Beekman Pub jukebox as I have drinks with one of the women who passed in the night during those years.

It was at that time that I came to appreciate "[Leyla](#)" (1970), performed by Eric Clapton's then band, Derek and the Dominos. Nika, a friend who had managed to get out of communist Poland, told me that at the time emigrating was just a fantasy, she'd listened for the song when signals from Western radio stations penetrated the Iron Curtain at night. I was reminded how as a boy, when the BBC radio monopoly played contemporary music only sparingly, I'd tune into the offshore pirate radio stations and, at night, Radio Luxemburg, which beamed pop music to the UK. For Nika, "[Leyla](#)" represented freedom. We had near-arguments over the complex meanings of that word, but I always backed off, knowing that for her it was simple—understandably so. Reading the lyrics as I write, I'm struck by the coincidence (at least I think it's a coincidence) that they express the man's love for a woman who doesn't reciprocate. But just as Clapton eventually won [the woman \(Pattie Boyd\)](#) in real life, my friend won her freedom in hers. (I still wish the guitars didn't whine so!)

In 1990, I went to Paris, my third time there and the last time I went on vacation on my own. The first week, I stayed with a cousin I'd never met before, Pamela, along with her French husband and three Franco-Scottish daughters. I spent the next week in a hotel near the Argentine Metro stop. For several days, I roamed the city alone, proving to myself that I could manage with my inadequate French. I even held a few conversations, but spoke to someone who suggested we meet again, naturally, only on my last evening.

During that trip, I was re-introduced to Serge Gainsbourg, whom I'd known only for the widely censored 1969 song "[Je t'Aime... Moi Non Plus](#)," a catchy song with the sounds of

Gainsbourg and his then girlfriend, Jane Birkin, ostensibly making love. It turned out that his songs had become even more controversial into the eighties (he died in 1991), but many were musically original and mesmerizing. Here are Gainsbourg and Birkin on a [track](#) from *Ballade de Melody Nelson* (1971). The plot of this album is about a middle aged man trying to seduce a teenage girl: more controversial in today's world than his "Je t'Aime."

Is listening to music whose lyrics are distasteful different from reading a novel or even a newspaper article in a similar vein? Considering music's power to insinuate itself into our minds and hearts, the answer might be yes. Levitin has a discussion of this problem by way of the truly repellent Richard Wagner. A more challenging subject might be the chameleon composer, Richard Strauss, who wasn't anti-Semitic but who made compromises in the context of a totalitarian state. Or Gainsbourg, who recorded "[Lemon Incest](#)" (1985) with his then twelve-year-old daughter, Charlotte, today a star in her own right.

But here I am, writing about my first decade in New York, and yet the focus has been foreign music. Ironically, it was Pamela, in Paris, who introduced me to Sting's "[Englishman in New York](#)" (1987). But the song that captures the city for me comes from 1941. Long before Paul Simon alluded to Joe DiMaggio in "Mrs. Robinson" (1968), Les Brown and his orchestra, with Betty Bonnie's rich voice in the lead, recorded "[Joltin' Joe DiMaggio](#)," celebrating his 56-game hitting streak that summer of 1941. It's hard for a Red Sox and Mets fan like me to endorse the part of New York represented by the Yankees, but so be it. New York can be almost anything you want it to be, but the sometimes arrogant exuberance captured by this record always courses through it, despite all the changes in fashion, priorities and even 9/11.

## 7. Musical Heroes and Live Performances

I never expected to attend a concert by any of my favorite foreign singers. Since no one else I knew knew them, I figured they'd have no audience. But then BAM (the Brooklyn Academy of Music) announced a concert by Milton Nascimento. Back in 1984, a *Newsweek* article had alerted me to this Brazilian singer and songwriter, along with his new album at the time, *Anima*. I took a risk and bought the album. (It may have been the first, and was definitely the last, time a written review led me in the right musical direction.) Nascimento's voice was an acquired taste for me, but his distinctive songs and arrangements always won me over. In time, I came to love his voice, capable of powerful emotion and joyful falsettos. "*Comunhao*," from *Anima*, gives an indication of his energy and range, already amply evident in "*Tudo O Que Você Podia Ser*" on his 1972 breakthrough album, the first *Clube da Esquina* (Corner Club). Then there's his moving "*Canção da América*" ("Song of America," 1980). In the BAM concert, I was surprised to be so affected by someone I knew only through records. How can a solitary man up on a stage in a big space generate such a heartfelt response?

Then the Chilean group Inti Illimani, which I discovered on NPR in 1989, came to Manhattan's Town Hall. Here was a group that had started in 1967, gone into exile in 1973 with the advent of Pinochet, and been unable to return until 1988. Ignorant of Spanish, I can never be sure the lyrics I'm listening to aren't bloodcurdling or violent, as the sweetest-sounding Latin American songs can be. Take, for example, world-famous Brazilian composer Antonio Jobim's "*Águas de Março*" ("The Waters of March," 1972, here performed by Jobim and Elis Regina in 1974). An English speaker would be forgiven for failing to realize that the Portuguese lyrics, [translated into English](#), include such lines as:

It's a sliver of glass,

It is life, it's the sun,  
 It is night, it is death,  
 It's a trap, it's a gun

Whatever the words, Inti Illimani's performances on Andean and other instruments inspire delight. No group of musicians plays with greater love for their work and precision. They have recorded hundreds of tracks, but I couldn't find any of my favorites on YouTube. However, [the first track](#) of *Viva Chile* is reminiscent of a song I know performed not with flutes, as on this linked recording, but a sax.

I've had no desire to attend performances by many of my other favorite rock/pop artists. I dislike the recordings I've heard of the Beach Boys performing live. The group has an adolescent side they never outgrew that comes out on stage. As for Mina, I sense she would act like a show performer, at odds with so much of her beautifully wrought studio work. A friend who has seen Françoise Hardy on French television says she comes across as an idiot. I doubt she's any such thing, but I've read she's shy. Maybe she, too, belongs on record, just as most authors belong in their books.

## 8. Years Pass, Time Compresses

In 1991 I met Laura, who has been my partner ever since. Her taste ranges from fifties rock to Rachmaninov, from folk to opera.

For nearly two decades, Laura and I had season tickets to orchestral concerts at Carnegie. Among the highlights for me were several performances of Gustav Mahler symphonies. I'd been introduced to Mahler's work back at Sheffield University, when I attended a performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* ("Song of the Earth," 1908-1909), a symphony (though not named as such)

that concludes with a sixth movement of stern beauty. (The link is to a 1956 recording of this last movement, where an English translation of the words is reproduced.)

At one of our Carnegie concerts, we heard a performance of Mahler's Fifth (1902). As we descended the steps to the Seventh Avenue exit, I said I'd like the [Adagetto](#) played at my memorial service. Morbid, I suppose, but memorial services were on my mind after the one held for my mother. Since then, I've had some vague sense that I'd heard this sentiment about the Fifth Symphony's Adagetto expressed somewhere else. A few years later, Laura said the same thing about the Adagetto, forgetting that I had. It's the kind of experience that makes me question just how original our thoughts are. Maybe everything I've ever thought is already logged in the collective unconscious. Or the collective forgotten.

The Mahler music that I play most often at home is the [last movement of the Fourth Symphony](#) (1900), with its exotic score and lovely soprano-sung melody. For me, it's another instance where the music is at odds with the words. (Wikipedia has the German text and English translation [here](#).)

At most Carnegie concerts, the orchestra would perform a contemporary piece. Almost every one was interesting, some were absorbing, and occasionally one was moving. Almost all had novel sonic colors, and I was often flummoxed at how the orchestra could make such sounds with traditional instruments. Even so, in each case, I knew that listening to a CD or digital copy at home wouldn't have been satisfying, and that if it had come on the radio, I would have changed stations after a minute or two. These pieces required a concert hall's resonance to work.

I go back to my childhood question about why I'd been receptive to the music of the Beatles and the mid-sixties but not the music of the previous decade. Maybe it's enough of an explanation that, like everyone else born in the late forties through mid-fifties, I'd reached the

age of peak susceptibility to new music. After that, enthusiasm for a new song, like attraction to a new shoe style or embrace of an architectural design, can snowball and become fashionable. But there remain the questions, why that particular thing or idea, and why at that particular moment? In my case, it might well be that the Tornados' track, "Telstar," had guided me to the new music. Even so, I can't escape the feeling that I was born to like the music that emerged in 1963. Nick Hornby writes about our taste in music being hardwired. I did feel my brain had been wired to respond to this new music and no music—no pop music anyway—from before.

It's paradoxical that this question lingers in my mind, considering that I've come around to enjoying fifties rock 'n' roll, either because of Laura's influence or my own loosening up. The rhythm, the electric guitars of the time and the pervasive sax now work for me, such as on Bill Haley & the Comets' "[Rock Around the Clock](#)" (1955). Meanwhile, Bobby Darin's infectious version of "[Beyond the Sea](#)" (1959) was surely the last big-band swing record to be a hit.

I don't share Laura's love of opera, but there are arias and other operatic moments that go straight to the heart. We both love [the duet from Bizet's \*Pearl Fishers\*](#) (this version performed by Placido Domingo & Andrea Bocelli). It was my father who brought it to our home in Darien in the early seventies.

I notice that while several examples of my father's music have come up in this memoir, only one piece of my mother's has. Mum kept so much inside, which she acknowledged as she lay dying in 2002, telling those of us around her bed that she knew she hadn't often expressed herself but that she'd always loved us. There never was any doubt about her love. But so much else was hidden. I did get some glimpses through music. Left to herself, she tuned the radio to music from Broadway and jazz standards and sang along with them. One day when Dad and she visited my Brooklyn home, knowing that she, like Dad, was a Frank Sinatra fan, I put on a CD of



his. After the third song, she said it wasn't right to string so many sad songs together. It was true: Whatever that album was, it had zero swing. I never listened to it again. A slow song she did like was one my brother introduced us to: Sting's "[Fields of Gold](#)" (1993). I think of them both whenever I hear it. I imagine Mum was influenced by knowing that Sting (like Eric Burden) comes from the northeast of England, near our home county, Durham. The concerts that got her excited were English music hall performances, of which there seemed to be a spate in Connecticut in the seventies and eighties. Sadly, my boredom at these events was hard to conceal. One other glimpse: She adored Andrea Bocelli and went to Jose Feliciano concerts. I'll never know exactly what she heard in them, but both performers are blind, and I doubt it was coincidental.

As I anticipated Mum's memorial service, Françoise Hardy and Iggy Pop's version of "[I'll Be Seeing You](#) (... in all the old familiar places)" (2000) kept going through my head. I thought of suggesting it for the service, but although Mum would have loved the versions she heard during World War II (it was written in 1938), I doubted she would have liked Hardy's, with its heavy bass and electric feel. Looking up what I thought was Vera Lynn's original, I find that her recording wasn't the first. I'd actually been thinking of Vera Lynn's "[We'll Meet Again](#)" (1940). Similar sentiment, but wrong song, a mistake that reinforced my sense that I never did get Mum quite right. Then again, we never get anyone quite right.

Nostalgia is always for time gone by, for people who have moved on, for missed opportunities to advance or repair. For expatriates, it's also for a lost place. The country the expatriate remembers is static, but that country hasn't stopped still. The stirring song "[And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times](#)" (1916) is always sung the last night of Britain's annual summer concerts known as [the Proms](#). When it plays via the Internet, I feel the joy in the Albert Hall's

audience's rousing singing of William Blake's words (1808), but the joy for me is inseparable from feelings of loss. It doesn't mean I would have been happier in England. Chances are I had more opportunities in America. But the country of one's origin is a clinging companion. The framers of the United States Constitution were wise to require that to be elected president or vice president, the candidate must be a "[natural born citizen](#)." The danger of foreign birth needn't be about betrayal; just mixed loyalties.

The past surfaces all the time. I gave up the active practice of law in 1999 to commit myself full-time to writing. Having been in school from the ages of four to twenty-five, I had no desire to return to the classroom. However, I have taken three semester-long writing courses since moving to New York. During the third, I became friends with Betsy, a writer of exquisite fiction, though better known as a journalist and editor. Out of the blue one day, she sent me a link to Richard Hawley's "[Born Under a Bad Sign](#)" (2005) a song whose arrangement is reminiscent of *Pet Sounds*. The album's title, *Coles Corner*, refers to Sheffield's city center, making for a double instance of serendipity: Betsy making the recommendation without knowing I'd lived there, and Hawley coming from the city where I first heard *Pet Sounds*.

Of all the artists I've loved over the years, and whose work I still do, only two have kept pace with my own tastes. Or rather, have my tastes kept pace with their development. The last three tracks of then seventy-year-old Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys' 2012 album, *That's Why God Made the Radio*, are beautiful. Of this trio, the first, "[From There to Back Again](#)," has the most interesting structure, a wistful lyric followed by a fractured series of signature Beach Boy styles. And here's the last track, "[Summer's Gone](#)," with the achingly beautiful, criminally short introductions and closings that have been trademarks of Brian Wilson's work.

Meanwhile, in 2010, at the age of sixty-six, Françoise Hardy released *La Pluie Sans Parapluie*. Her vocal range had been limited for several years, but unlike many other aging singers, she retains her sensitivity and musicality, especially on the haunting [title song](#) about love that's like rain without an umbrella. In 2012, she released what she now says was her last album, *L'Amour Fou*, highlighted for me by another piano-arpeggio song, "[Normandia](#)."

### ***9. De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum, But We Do Anyway***

There are physiological reasons why our receptivity to music declines. Levitin cites the hardening of the hairs in the ears that stops us from detecting high-register tones, like birds singing. Separately, I've noticed in myself greater difficulty in mentally processing sounds, which I've known other people to complain of as they get older. I suggest another factor is developmental. In our twenties, we're exposed to all kinds of ideas and demands, and because we haven't yet set a true course, they all influence us, if in varying degrees. As the decades go by, our course becomes clearer, we grow into our chosen roles and shrug off distractions. I figure some parallel process occurs with music, pulling us increasingly back to the familiar. The exceptions are legion, but today, I'm one who finds new music hard to absorb.

I'm guessing I heard European and South American Brazilian music beginning in the seventies as an extension of the music I'd loved in the sixties, even though those European and South American musicians incorporated contemporary U.S. and British trends. In the seventies and beyond, American and British music moved on to disco, punk, northern dance, hip-hop, rap. Still later, it became fashionable to lay it all out emotionally. Laura and I complain about "broomsticks" —singers who wail away as though they had painful objects thrust up their behinds. Other singers hold back their voices or revert to baby voices.

While there have been songs in America and Britain that I like very much, some fundamental change occurred that must lie in music theory, such as chord structure. I wish I could put my finger on it. It's in a song such as Eric Clapton's "[Wonderful Tonight](#)" (1977). When my brother played it to my father and me one night, I dismissed it as "sentimental." To my ear, Clapton's guitar whines like a complaining neighbor and the song grinds away to nowhere. You can't call someone's music "sentimental" without being exposed to the same charge, and it wasn't long before my brother justifiably called something I like sentimental. Yet "[Wonderful Tonight](#)" sets my teeth on edge, the way most post-sixties ballads do.

Not all eras are created equal. Like politics, prosperity and recession, the arts go through cycles. Music has flourished at certain times, but at others, it has lacked distinction. In 1788, Mozart composed his last three symphonies, which, considering their enduring quality, was an incredible artistic feat. The next dramatic event in Western music was the big leap represented by Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, first performed in 1803. Well, this [timeline](#) lists two post-1788 Mozart compositions. Either way, after Mozart's death in 1791, not much of note (so to speak) happened for a dozen years.

To what extent do we like a piece of music for itself or for our associations? On reflection, it's the question my old Music 11 professor wanted us to answer. But who can say how recent decades will be judged a century from now.

Still, judge we will.

In that regard, I've lived in a glass house my entire life. When I confessed to my American high school classmates my enjoyment of the Beach Boys' experimental late sixties and early seventies' albums, they shrugged their shoulders —and that was if they were being polite. I learned to keep that treasure trove to myself. In college, a friend's girlfriend on hearing I liked

the Moody Blues, said, “I’m surprised at the simplicity of your taste.” As I wrote in the introduction, judgments about music come with moral conviction. Much later, a certain woman and I had a lot going for us, but I suppose we had next to nothing in common. She summarized our differences when the Supremes came on the radio, and I told her my favorite track of theirs was the admittedly self-consciously psychedelic “[Reflections](#)” (1967). “Even when you like someone good,” she told me with affection, “you like the wrong song.”

No one will like all or even most of the pieces I link to. I’m struck by how many artists’ voices I used to dislike and have grown to love, including those of Gordon Lightfoot, Mina, Joan Armatrading and Milton Nascimento, along with the style of German lieder singing. I do hope there are some finds for anyone who has made it here, to the end.

### **Notes and Disclaimers**

When assigning dates, I chose the year of release with pop and rock music, while for classical, much of it written before the advent of the record, I went with the year of composition.

The occasional translations are sometimes mine, sometimes borrowed. Where the title is too ambiguous for simple English translation, I figured best not to bother.

Some names have been changed, mostly in cases where I couldn’t easily reach the person to make sure they wouldn’t mind being mentioned.

Finally, I can’t vouch for the copyright of any material linked to in this memoir, and the content of any webpage may change at any time. It has done so even as I’ve prepared this memoir.